

CASE STUDY



How Hennepin County is Opening Pathways into Public Sector Jobs



How Hennepin County expanded its access to local talent by making its jobs more accessible



ABOUT HENNEPIN COUNTY



1.27M

Population

214,180

STARs in county

9,700

County employees

4,151

STAR county employees

45

Cities in county

\$3.10B

Annual Budget

About the Hennepin Pathways Program

In 2013, Hennepin County launched the Pathways Program, a partnership between regional employers, educators, and community organizations that helped connect diverse job seekers to meaningful public sector careers.

The county viewed public sector jobs as a key way to reduce economic disparities and and enhance economic mobility.

Beyond hiring needs, the county saw pathways as a way to connect residents' potential with public service careers:

- **Connect residents to stable, good-paying jobs.** At that time, one third of county residents were receiving some form of public assistance.
- **Build a workforce that reflects the community.** Providing job opportunities to excluded populations helped address disparities in income, homeownership, and education while creating a workforce that truly reflected the community it served.
- **Add skills and experience to the county's skill set.** By diversifying its workforce, the county brought in employees with new language abilities, skills, experiences, and perspectives — including firsthand experience navigating county programs and services.

THE RESULT

460

employees hired through the Pathways Program

\$29

Avg hourly starting wage

43%

Pathways Program employees eventually promoted



MAY XIONG

Chief Workforce Development Officer | Hennepin County



NOLA SLAGTER-JOHNSON

Workforce Development Director | Hennepin County

The Pathways Program brings STAR talent to public services

Hennepin County wanted to open up more jobs to talent in the community and support resident mobility

From the beginning, the Pathways Program was grounded in the idea that residents had the skills and abilities to work for the county if unnecessary job requirements and barriers were removed.

County leaders spoke with departments to understand their hiring challenges and sought out partners at nonprofits and community colleges to find new talent, support skill development, and strengthen job placement.

The county partnered with community colleges and local nonprofits for training. For example, [Project for Pride in Living](#), a career-readiness and affordable housing nonprofit, emerged as one of the core partners.



1

Open access to jobs by removing unnecessary requirements

Under a directive from the County Administrator, Human Resources reviewed all job classifications to remove unnecessary entry-level requirements that excluded qualified workers. For example, some building operations technician roles required a boiler operator license, even though only three county facilities needed that expertise.

The County removed that requirement and other unnecessary credentials, including bachelor's degree requirements, across more than 400 job classifications, with findings shared with the County Board to support expansion of the Pathways program.

2

Expand job pathways by building skilling onramps

The county partnered with the nonprofit, Project for Pride in Living, to recruit and train workers for in-demand roles like office specialists, human services workers, and building operations technicians. Residents connect with the Pathways Program through the nonprofit's outreach and programming or through the [county's website](#), where they can apply for jobs that are part of the Pathways Program.

3

Remove barriers to participation

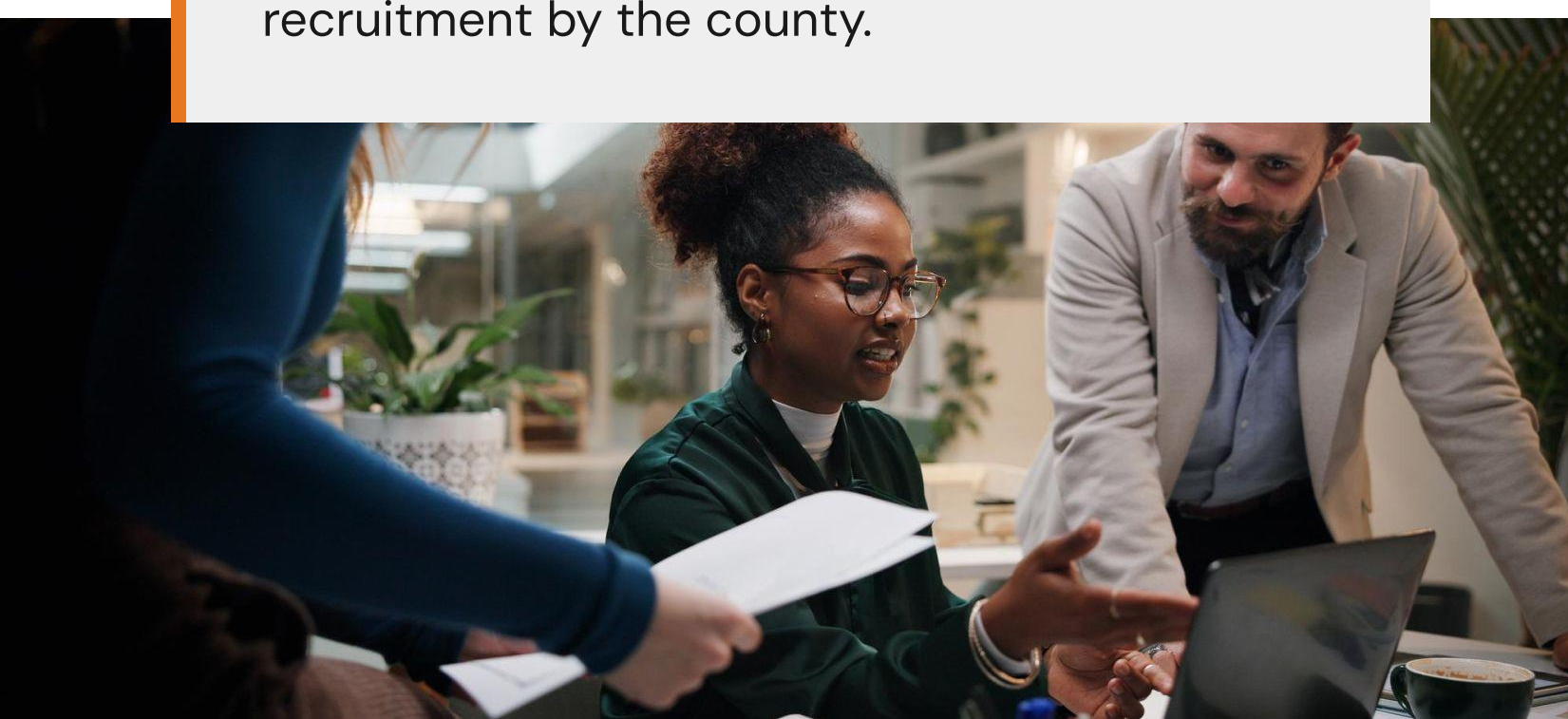
Because access to work is not only about skill alignment, the Pathways Program is designed to facilitate participation and support the transition into the job. The program provides interview coaching and networking support.

Upon completion of the training, participants are eligible for internships and jobs with the county or other participating employers.

The Pathways Program provides entry into a range of county jobs

The Hennepin County Pathways Program is built on strong collaboration among the county government, local colleges, and nonprofit organizations all working together to expand access to public sector careers.

Through this partnership, residents can enter the program in multiple ways – whether through community colleges, workforce centers, nonprofit partners, or direct recruitment by the county.



The Pathways Program engaged all its stakeholders to build an effective workforce engine

INSIGHT 1

Use your convening power

This is an all hands effort. Government has the power to bring everyone to the table.

INSIGHT 2

Recognize worker risks and returns

New workers can face a benefits cliff. A thoughtful wage policy and targeted employment supports increase everyone's ROI.

INSIGHT 3

Design for results

Be prepared to change your approach to improve your results.



INSIGHT 1

Hennepin united employers and community partners through its convening power.



Hennepin County aligned internal and external stakeholders because change is an all hands effort, bringing everyone to the table.

INTERNALLY

Internally, intentional partnership between HR and workforce development functions were crucial to success.

Hennepin County brought both functions together to support the county's internal talent needs and the community's workforce needs.

By integrating the perspectives of both employer (HR) and funder (workforce system), they brought a workforce lens to HR and vice versa, enabling innovation to advance both missions.

IN THE COMMUNITY

The County convened small- and medium-sized businesses through the Workforce Leadership Council **to better understand skill demand and talent challenges**, partnering with Real Time Talent as a neutral facilitator and using the U.S. Chamber's Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) model.

This structure allowed the County to participate as an employer while ensuring business needs drove the agenda.

Through TPM, employers with shared occupational demand worked collectively to align on qualifications, training, hiring, and career pathways. This approach helped employers and the County better understand talent challenges and adjust hiring practices—for example, long-term care employers identified 100% turnover in CNA roles within two years and used those insights to rethink recruitment and retention strategies.

Hennepin recognized worker risks and returns

New workers can face a benefits cliff. A thoughtful wage policy and targeted supports increase everyone's ROI.

Workers often forego income to participate in training and this can be a barrier to participation.

The county has created paid work-based learning models to address this. **For example:**

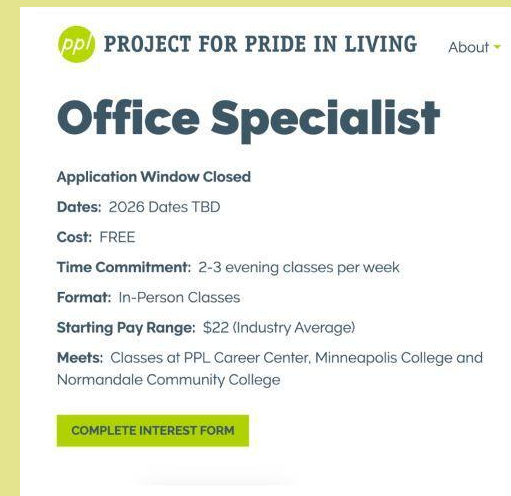
The Medical Examiner office had trouble filling for specific roles and the HR and Workforce Development teams partnered with them to create a trainee position (a less formal apprenticeship), that used a tuition reimbursement model to train for a specific position while they are paid in the role and then at the end of the training they moved into the position.

Trainees are paid at 90% of the pay scale while in training.

County data showed that some employees remained on public assistance due to wages that did not overcome the benefits cliff. In response, the County raised its minimum wage to \$20 per hour in 2021 and \$22 per hour by 2025, helping improve economic mobility and attract new employees.

Beyond wages, participants received targeted wraparound supports through Project for Pride In Living (PPL), including paid training, financial coaching, transportation assistance, professional clothing, and limited emergency microgrants to address one-time barriers that could prevent participation.

Jobs on the Pathways site advertise wages and paid work-based learning.



PROJECT FOR PRIDE IN LIVING About ▾

Office Specialist

Application Window Closed
Dates: 2026 Dates TBD
Cost: FREE
Time Commitment: 2-3 evening classes per week
Format: In-Person Classes
Starting Pay Range: \$22 (Industry Average)
Meets: Classes at PPL Career Center, Minneapolis College and Normandale Community College

[COMPLETE INTEREST FORM](#)

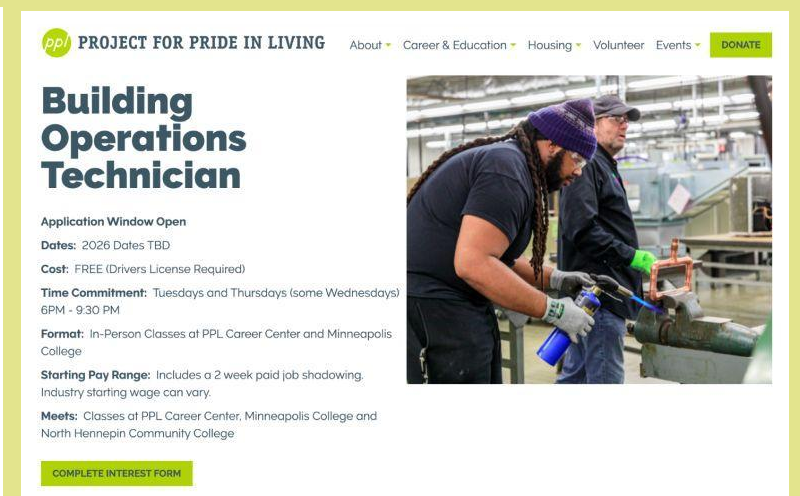


PROJECT FOR PRIDE IN LIVING About ▾

Human Services Pathway

Application Window Closed
Dates: 2026 Dates TBD
Cost: FREE
Time Commitment: 2-3 evening classes per week
Format: In-Person Classes
Starting Pay Range: \$22 (Industry Average)
Meets: Classes at PPL Career Center, Minneapolis College and Normandale Community College


[COMPLETE INTEREST FORM](#)



PROJECT FOR PRIDE IN LIVING About ▾ Career & Education ▾ Housing ▾ Volunteer ▾ Events ▾ DONATE

Building Operations Technician

Application Window Open
Dates: 2026 Dates TBD
Cost: FREE (Drivers License Required)
Time Commitment: Tuesdays and Thursdays (some Wednesdays) 6PM - 9:30 PM
Format: In-Person Classes at PPL Career Center and Minneapolis College
Starting Pay Range: Includes a 2 week paid job shadowing. Industry starting wage can vary.
Meets: Classes at PPL Career Center, Minneapolis College and North Hennepin Community College



[COMPLETE INTEREST FORM](#)

They designed for their program for results



Be prepared to change your approach to improve your results.

From the outset, the County used a results-oriented, data-driven approach in partnership with Project for Pride In Living (PPL).

A 2020 evaluation combining county administrative data and PPL program data identified opportunities to improve performance. Since then, the County and PPL have met regularly to review data and make program adjustments, shifting from compliance-based monitoring to continuous improvement that better aligns participant skills with in-demand roles and leads to stronger wages and growth opportunities.



Results



The Pathways Program pays for itself.

Since the program launched, hundreds of Hennepin County residents have connected to county employment, higher wages, and promotions.

Graduates not hired by Hennepin County have also gone on to secure employment with other public and private employers.

92%

of Pathways hires stay with the county for more than a year.

460

employees hired through the Pathways Program since launch

43%

Pathways Program employees eventually promoted

\$29

Avg hourly starting wage



ABOUT US

Opportunity@Work works directly with federal, state, and local governments to modernize hiring, expand career pathways, and implement skills-based talent practices that makes public sector jobs accessible to all workers with the skills needed for the role, including workers [Skilled Through Alternative Routes \(STARs\)](#).

We provide the data, tools, guidance, and peer learning environments that help public sector leaders remove barriers, improve hiring efficiency, and build more inclusive and effective workforces.

[JOIN THE HUB](#)

